



SHARING THE BURDEN OF THE PAST

Peer support and self help amongst former Lord's Resistance Army youth

**Justice and Reconciliation Project and
Quaker Peace and Social Witness**

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Acronyms

CPU	Child Protection Unit
CPA	Concerned Parents Association
DDR	Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration
FAP	Formerly abducted person
GUSCO	Gulu Support the Children Organisation
IDP	Internally displaced persons
INGO	International non-governmental organisation
LRA	Lord's Resistance Army
JRP	Justice and Reconciliation Project
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
PTSD	Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
QPSW	Quaker Peace & Social Witness
UPDF	Uganda Peoples' Defence Force

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Executive summary

The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA)'s use of abducted children and youth has been much researched, and the horrors of their experiences in captivity and difficulties reintegrating into their communities recorded. Nonetheless, the existing disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration strategies pursued to date are brief and insufficient interventions.

This project was conducted by Justice and Reconciliation Project and Quaker Peace & Social Witness. Both organisations had encountered in the course of previous research the existence of self-formed groups of formerly abducted persons (FAPs) / former-LRA, and wanted to assess the role they could and did play in the process of grassroots level reintegration and reconciliation. We identified 21 such groups spread across IDP camps in the four Acholi districts of Gulu, Amuru, Kitgum and Pader ranging in size from 8 members to 232. Some were exclusively former-LRA; others had opted to admit other war-affected youth.

Groups varied greatly in terms of activities; however they all attempt to engage principal problems facing FAPs including: poverty, community exclusion and stigmatisation, isolation, and spiritual and psychological distress. Our findings suggest that former LRA peer support groups are an important and effective vehicle for reintegration and reconciliation, all the more so given the paucity of alternative long-term reintegration provision. Former LRA peer groups positively affect:

- economic reintegration including provision of livelihoods and microfinance
- social inclusion and reintegration
- community reconciliation
- psychosocial development
- cultural education and reconnection

We found that groups were interested in extending their activities to include:

- trauma healing
- advocacy and referral
- supporting disarmament and reintegration of remaining LRA forces

The informal self-help groups we investigated are accomplishing successes with almost no resources. It would be wrong to suggest that all is well, however. Many groups are confronting enormous challenges not least of which is access to material support and connection to wider social organisations and assistance. Support to this nascent group of civil society could be delivered to build confidence in the self-help models developed and in the leadership they demonstrate. Networking, certain types of training and small material inputs in kind would help maximise their effectiveness.

Introduction

The two organisations engaged in this project, Justice and Reconciliation Project¹ and Quaker Peace & Social Witness,² shared three main objectives in undertaking this research.

First, previous research by both organisations had revealed the existence of associations of former Lord's Resistance Army, and we were interested to know whether these were functioning as positive or negative forces for demobilisation, reintegration and reconciliation, and what sorts of activities they were engaged in. At least one previous study³ made reference to such groups as potentially dangerous reservoirs of LRA support, replicating LRA philosophy or structures.

Second, peer support of vulnerable young people, sometimes including and occasionally focusing on former members of the LRA, is now a key element of psychosocial humanitarian and early recovery programming in northern Uganda. Our impression was that these interventions were primarily based on intuitive reasoning: little evaluation of the effectiveness of peer support amongst war affected groups has been undertaken in Uganda or elsewhere.

Lastly, we were aware that several reports had identified multiple failings in current reintegration processes with regard to former LRA members.⁴ This is a particular cause for concern at present. Whether the peace accord in Juba is signed or not, some, perhaps many of the remaining LRA forces in Garamba are likely to return to civilian life. We are anxious that this is not just 'business as usual', given the shortcomings of the process to date, and wanted to explore new opportunities for effective reintegration.

Our data was gathered in focus group discussions with former-LRA across the four districts of Acholiland. This has been supplemented by the earlier published and unpublished research undertaken by both organisations, as well as that of others, and the available literature.

We have written up our findings as two separate reports, one focusing on the implications for DDR⁵ and this one, looking at the shape and impact of self-help initiatives by former-LRA, and the implications for future policy.

¹ Justice and Reconciliation Project (JRP) is a partnership between Gulu NGO Forum and the Liu Institute for Global Issues, University of British Columbia, undertaking research primarily in the areas of traditional and transitional justice.

² Quaker Peace & Social Witness is part of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain. QPSW's Uganda programme supports grassroots-based peace initiatives in northern Uganda.

³ E.g. Tim Allen and Mareike Schomerus *A Hard Homecoming - Lessons learned from the reception centre process on effective interventions for former 'abductees' in northern Uganda* (2006), Washington, DC Management Systems International p 51

⁴ These have been explored in depth, especially issues of reception centres by Grace Akello, Annemiek Richters & Ria Reis in 'Reintegration of former child soldiers in northern Uganda: coming to terms with children's agency and accountability'. *Intervention* 2006, Volume 4, Number 3, Page 229 – 243; and [3] Allen and Schomerus (2006).

⁵ Justice and Reconciliation Project and Quaker Peace & Social Witness *With or Without Peace – Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration in Northern Uganda*, (2008) [<http://www.northern-uganda.moonfruit.com/fieldnotes/>]

Background

The experience of abduction

A majority of the LRA's forces were children and adolescents who were forcibly recruited and served for typically short periods of time – overall only 20% are believed to have been with the LRA for more than one year.⁶ Unpublished data⁷ has revealed much about how such ordinary, decent young people were rapidly incorporated and made to function as part of a highly effective force, measured by its capacity to spread terror and destruction.

LRA leader Joseph Kony's prescience, telepathy and other magical powers are given great credence throughout northern Uganda, and are understood in a cultural context where a rich spirit world, both benign and malevolent, is a very present part of daily life.⁸ The impressionable minds of youth, naturally acculturated into a world of magic and spirits, are easily reprogrammed through brutality and brainwashing techniques to understand a world in which Kony can read their minds, can use birds and animals to spy on them, and can control their actions. They are inducted into a panoptic nightmare where their actions and even thoughts are permanently exposed and could lead to torture and execution. The LRA is known frequently to have used the technique of forcing abductees to commit culturally proscribed acts in order to separate them from their communities and sense of value,⁹ including the killing of captives, rape, and the mutilation of corpses. At its most extreme this includes forcing individuals to kill members of their immediate family.¹⁰

The LRA functions as a formal modern force, with personnel having a range of specialised functions. Some were sent on training courses in Juba or Khartoum, for example as paramedics, midwives, logistics specialists, and administrators.¹¹ Many fighters received formal combat training away from the battlegrounds. On the other hand many small groups of LRA seem to have functioned largely autonomously, out of contact with the chain of command, controlled primarily by Kony's predictions and their fear of observation.¹²

A report by the Berkeley-Tulane Initiative for Vulnerable Populations published in 2007 revealed both the scale and some of the complexity of abduction.¹³ This found that of an estimated total of between 58,000 and 75,000 people who have been abducted, about 36% of male and 29% of female FAPs were captive for less than a month, while 16% of males and 34% of females were captive for more than one year. Many who were captive for a short period were not integrated or initiated into

⁶ Phuong Pham, Patrick Vinck and Eric Stover *Abducted -The Lord's Resistance Army and Forced Conscription in Northern Uganda* (2007). Berkeley-Tulane Initiative on Vulnerable Populations

⁷ Transcripts of PTSD therapy sessions conducted with reception centre residents in 2006 by the organisation VIVO [<http://www.vivo.org>]

⁸ See Erin K. Baines, 'The Haunting of Alice: Local Approaches to Justice and Reconciliation in Northern Uganda,' *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, Vol. 1, No. 1, March 2007; Thomas Harlacher, Francis Xavier Okot, Caroline Aloyo Obonyo, Mychelle Balthazard, and Ronald Atkinson, *Traditional Ways of Coping in Acholi: Cultural provisions for reconciliation and healing from war* (Kampala: Thomas Harlacher and Caritas Gulu Archdiocese, 2006).

⁹ Tim Allen *War and Justice in Northern Uganda: A risk assessment of the International Criminal Court's Intervention*. (2005) Crisis States Programme, London School of Economics: 89.

¹⁰ Justice and Reconciliation Project *Alice's Story – Cultural and Spiritual Dimensions of Reconciliation* (2006), Fieldnote 1 [<http://www.northern-uganda.moonfruit.com/#!/fieldnotes/4516577115>]

¹¹ LRA structure and tactics have been explored for example the report by International Conflict Group *Northern Uganda: Understanding and solving the conflict* (2004); H. Behrend *War in Northern Uganda: African Guerillas* (1998); and a number of reports by Tim Allen.

¹² [7] VIVO PTSD treatment transcripts

¹³ [6] Pham, Vinck and Stover (2007).

the LRA, but were used as porters or informants. However the severity of the impact of even brief abduction is revealed by a recent study of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in Anaka IDP camp.¹⁴ This found that while 8% of the non-abducted population between 12 and 25 years old showed the symptomatology of severe PTSD, this rose to 33% in all FAPs and to 48% in those who had been in captivity for more than one month.

The distinction between the reintegration needs of those who have been fully absorbed and inducted into the LRA and those who were not has not been investigated. It is clear that people returning from the LRA to civilian life are not a homogeneous group in a number of respects, and this factor partly explains the substantial differences between how successfully individuals have reintegrated into their communities of origin or other civilian lifestyles and locations. Abductees served with the LRA as commanders of various ranks, fighters, ‘wives’ of commanders, specialist non-combatant functions, and porters / slaves.

Former-LRA can perhaps be more usefully categorised with regard to reintegration needs in terms of those who were substantially institutionalised and integrated into the LRA versus those who for whatever reason remained outsiders, with all the gradations between. The experience of women and men is particularly distinct, not least in that women typically spent far longer in captivity. Almost all who were abducted are exposed to extreme physical and mental suffering. Many will have undergone deliberate processes to destroy their personalities and their belief systems.

Reintegration in theory and practice

The successful reintegration of ex-combatants is an essential part of the transition from war to peace and is generally regarded as a necessary prerequisite to both a stable society and sustainable peace. One way to define successful reintegration is the lack of any visible differences between demobilised and non-mobilised members of a community in terms of social or economic status.¹⁵ Key elements thought to contribute to successful reintegration are:

...community sensitisation, formal disarmament and demobilisation, a period of transition in an Interim Care Centre, tracing and family mediation, family reunification, traditional cleansing and healing ceremonies and religious support, school or skills training, ongoing access to healthcare for those in school or training, and individual supportive counselling, facilitation and encouragement.¹⁶

The formal reintegration process in northern Uganda in theory includes most of the elements noted above. On release, escape or capture, former-LRA are held for a maximum of 48 hours in a UPDF Child Protection Unit (CPU) where they are disarmed and debriefed. Those who have been in captivity for more than three months are referred to a Reception Centre, where a typical length of stay is between three and six weeks. During this time the family is located and a reunion facilitated. Medical problems are treated. Residents are ‘counselled’, principally in the sense of being given advice about how to behave and deal with problems they may face on return. Some receive very basic vocational training. Some reception centres offer therapeutic activities including art and group

¹⁴ As yet unpublished research by VIVO

¹⁵ John Williamson ‘The disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of child soldiers: social and psychological transformation in Sierra Leone’. *Intervention* 2006, Volume 4, Number 3, Page 185 - 205

¹⁶ [15] Williamson (2006)

discussions. On occasion some reception centres facilitate traditional cleansing, prayer or ‘welcome home’ ceremonies. Those who return through a reception centre can claim amnesty from the Amnesty Commission offices in Gulu or Kitgum, which leads to the eventual granting of an amnesty certificate and package of resettlement goods and money. Returnees are then escorted to their families and arrangements made for follow-up visits.

Criticism has been levelled at existing components of DDR.¹⁷ Reception centres have largely focused on young women and children, notwithstanding the large numbers of FAPs who are young men. Other criticisms have included prescriptive counselling strategies, inappropriate injection of religious values into processes of forgiveness and reconciliation, and failure to follow up. Amnesty certificates and packages have often taken many months to deliver. Where amnesty has been successfully delivered it has sometimes sparked community resentment for ‘rewarding’ returnees, thus increasing stigma and thwarting reintegration. There is little or no process for distinguishing between those with varying experiences in captivity and consequent divergent needs, nor is there recognition of reintegration as an ongoing process in which difficulties may emerge over time. For example, an apparently successful family reunion may deteriorate with time in the face of community stigmatisation or of disturbed behaviour by the returnee, or simply through the exhaustion of the amnesty package.

Reconciliation has been promoted by traditional, religious and political leaders for many years and these groups created the political pressure to pass the Amnesty Act of 2000. Although considerable efforts to sensitise communities has been made, former-LRA continue to be a stigmatised and socially excluded group in northern Uganda, and there continues to be widespread tension between those who have returned from the LRA and those who were never in its ranks. Encouragingly, a recent Survey of War Affected Youth (SWAY) study reported that for most, difficulties of FAPs reintegrating into their families and communities diminished ‘over time’. However, it was also found that a group of around 20% of men and 6% of women faced ongoing rejection by families and/or communities.¹⁸

Criticism of rehabilitation and reintegration processes has sometimes identified the lack of involvement of those already reintegrated. According to the Women’s Commission,

With further training and by involving them in decision-making... young people could work with and inspire confidence in the new arrivals and would likely create ways to further improve the process of return and reintegration. It would also offer all formerly abducted young people opportunities to continue to build networks of solidarity and support and expand the reach of the organisations to conduct follow-up.¹⁹

¹⁷ See [4] Akello *et al* (2006); and [3] Allen and Schomerus (2006)

¹⁸ Jeannie Annan, Christopher Blattman, Khristopher Carlson, and Dyan Mazurana *Making reintegration work for youth in northern Uganda - Findings from two phases of the Survey of War Affected Youth* (2007)

¹⁹ Northern Ugandan exceptions include *Against all odds: surviving the war on adolescents - Promoting the Protection and Capacity of Ugandan and Sudanese Adolescents in Northern Uganda*. (2001) Allison Anderson Pillsbury and Jane Lowicki. Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children, which found the involvement of the formerly abducted in support groups helped returnees feel supported and improved their self-esteem, the SWAY report (Annan *et al* 2006) [18], which noted that “peer support is highly valued by youth and seen as important for dealing with their stress”; and *Listening to Youth: the Experiences of Young People in Northern Uganda* (2007) Women’s Commission. UNICEF, which recommends “national and international stakeholders provide more support to youth organisations, as the institutions that most effectively and comprehensively address their priority needs”. None of these reports however suggest that an in-depth analysis of peer support was undertaken.

Of the areas of intervention identified above,²⁰ this report finds that at least three are currently undertaken by peer support groups in northern Uganda (community sensitisation, family mediation, and supportive counselling and encouragement), and groups have the potential to contribute to others (formal disarmament, traditional cleansing and healing ceremonies, and skills training). In short, we found that peer support groups contribute to sustainable and multifaceted community-based reintegration and they demonstrate long-term potential to contribute to civil society. We echo the Women's Commission's recent assertion that it is the responsibility of the "humanitarian community to identify and learn from these strategies as a way to build on existing community mechanisms rather than bringing in external approaches."²¹

Methodology

Central questions

The project was shaped by three central lines of inquiry:

1. What is the experience of former-LRA after return to their communities? What are the implications of this for the DDR of remaining forces in Garamba?
2. What are the needs of former-LRA? Do different experiences in the bush, or on return, influence the type of support needed by returnees?
3. How do former-LRA deal with failing reintegration, i.e. when they find themselves as a socially excluded group? Are there self-help initiatives by former-LRA? Do they facilitate reintegration?

Data collection and analysis

The main body of data for this report was collected through interviews and focus group discussions with 21 peer support groups including former-LRA. The research team included a formerly abducted person who has an extensive network of relationships and contacts within the ex-LRA community; this was used to identify respondents. In sites where the researchers had no connections, contact was made through local leaders. Respondents were then selected based on pre-determined criteria: that group membership was at least 50% former-LRA; that groups had self-formed; that they had been in existence for at least one year; and that their aims included at least some element of reintegration.

In the course of the research, a total of 376 individuals representing 21 peer support groups were consulted. 20 respondents were interviewed individually (17 leaders and 3 members), and 358 respondents (approximately equal numbers of men and women) were interviewed in 24 focus group discussions. Research was carried out in 19 locations, including IDP camps, return sites and urban areas in Amuru, Gulu, Kitgum and Pader districts. Sites were chosen to balance geographical spread and areas with reported high rates of abduction. Further interviews were undertaken with five NGOs

²⁰ [15] Williamson (2006)

²¹ Women's Commission *Listening to Youth: the Experiences of Young People in Northern Uganda* (2007) UNICEF

providing projects to support former-LRA. The selection of respondents was not random but guided by the identification of certain FAPs through the connections of researchers and by local leaders. It is likely that self-formed groups of ex-combatants are operational but are unknown to the wider community for various reasons. It is therefore difficult to know how representative of self-formed peer support groups across the north our sample is. It is also possible that individuals who have joined peer groups are untypical of the larger population of former-LRA, and may represent those facing greater difficulties or with higher levels of need.

The data was then coded according to discernible patterns and themes, analysed and cross-checked by research officers. In February 2008 we revisited our respondent groups and shared our initial findings, for verification purposes, and as an element of our model of interactive action research.

Other unpublished data collected by both participating organisations was used. This included:

- An in-depth set of interviews with 15 individuals who had escaped the LRA in the preceding two years (QPSW in partnership with Conciliation Resources, 2006)
- Five focus group discussions held in October 2006 with 24 former-LRA commanders who had contributed to the *Coming Home* (2006)²² report by QPSW and Conciliation Resources
- Interviews and focus groups conducted by JRP with participants in a cultural competition
- Notes kept by researchers of informal conversations with former-LRA and key informants.

Findings

Needs

Needs identified by respondents have social, spiritual, psychological and economic aspects. There has been little exploration of how different experiences in the LRA impact on reintegration problems, the main exception being mothers of children conceived in the bush. Our study identified a number of differential factors between men and women, combatants and non-combatants, and commanders and other ranks.

The public and widely reported narrative in Acholiland of forgiveness and willingness to accept former-LRA is articulated both as an expression of Acholi culture, and as a conscious strategy to end the war by encouraging the LRA to come home. In practice the reception is variable and many individuals from all of our respondent groups reported negative reactions from members of the community, including family members, following return. Non-abducted members of communities often hold negative views about FAPs, including the belief that they are responsible for, or complicit in, the crimes and atrocities committed by the LRA; the belief that they are trained in extreme violence and are dangerous as a result of possessing these capabilities; the belief that their experiences in the bush have de-socialised and disinhibited them leading to unpredictable and violent behaviour; the belief that they have been spiritually corrupted according to traditional belief systems by their time in the bush through committing prohibited acts; envy of those whose relatives have been abducted but have not returned and who may have been killed; and the perception that

²² Quaker Peace & Social Witness and Conciliation Resources *Coming Home – Understanding why commanders of the Lord's Resistance Army chose to return to civilian life*, (2006). [http://www.c-r.org/our-work/uganda/documents/CR_Coming_Home_May06.pdf]

amnesty packages represent a ‘reward’ for rebellion, generating resentment and anger against recipients.

Respondents reported that hostility to and discrimination against FAPs is common, with many of them having been oppressively stigmatised. However this can be of different degrees with varying impacts. These ranged from FAPs encountering specific individuals who made abusive remarks when drunk; to FAPs who feared to collect water because they would be abused; female FAPs being abandoned by their husbands through pressure from their husbands’ families; and young mothers rendered destitute as a result of rejection by their parents and other family members.

Respondents fear widespread revenge killings in the future, especially in the event of a peace agreement. For example, one said, “We fear that revenge might still be taken on us in the future due to the wrongs we committed like killing and rape.”²³ This would suggest that ‘forgiveness’ by many is more precisely a suppression of feelings of anger and vengefulness as a strategy for ending the war. It was also noted that return to the land offers many more opportunities for revenge attacks compared to IDP camps, where people live in close proximity to each other, the army and police. A significant differential between those who held rank and those who did not was noted: junior commanders were sometimes feared or distrusted by other FAPs as well as the community at large. In several groups it was reported by group leaders that junior commanders preferred to keep their rank secret, even from other group members.

Respondents reported that stigmatisation of FAPs is related to the perceived spiritual problems associated with *cen*. *Cen* refers to being possessed or attacked by vengeful spirits of the dead, causing nightmares and flashbacks; delusions, anxiety and confusion; disturbed behaviour; unpredictable rages; physical and often debilitating pain; and severe misfortune, such as a sufferer’s child dying or their home catching fire. Symptoms were described by a number of respondents; for example one said: “At night I see people holding pangas and I wake up shouting. I feel like I should grab something and club it to death, even my child. When I’m not feeling well, when something possesses me I stay on my own, but when I hear loud voices I feel I should club them one by one.”²⁴ And another: “I have nightmares that somebody is strangling me, beating and cutting me with a panga. This is associated to the atrocities I was forced to commit while still in the bush.”²⁵

Cen will come upon an individual through committing murder, though witnessing killings or contact with corpses are also causes of affliction. *Cen* can also afflict those involved in other cultural prohibitions, including being a victim of rape or a child born in the bush (i.e. being conceived through rape, and / or lacking an acknowledged father). *Cen* is infectious to the extent that those in contact with sufferers can catch it. As Akello *et al* put it, “...there is a measure of chance in contracting *cen*. If that is the case, the symptoms can easily be warded off or removed. When they do not disappear, this indicates a person’s guilt in having committed a crime.”²⁶ Thus individuals with *cen* are ostracised both because it is an indication that they have committed prohibited acts and are unclean, and because of its infectious nature.

Because of *cen* even babies and young children from the bush, and other FAPs who were obviously not responsible for or directly involved in violence, are nonetheless rejected by their communities

²³ Male focus group member

²⁴ Female focus group member

²⁵ Male focus group member

²⁶ [4] Akello *et al* (2006)

and sometimes family members. Young mothers were identifiable as having multiple connected and cumulative disadvantages: they are likely to be perceived as rape victims and hence afflicted by *cen* irrespective of their behaviour or symptoms; they have the burden of caring for children who are similarly stigmatised and ostracised; they are less likely to be able to find non-abducted partners for the above reasons; as rights of access to land are through husbands they are more likely to be economically disadvantaged due to landlessness; and lone-parent childcare responsibilities mean that they are less likely to be able to return to school or find any employment. As one respondent put it: “When I returned, I found a hard life because I came back with two children from captivity. Personally I was a child mother so I had no one to take me up. People used to isolate me and my children; they said not to associate with my children because of *cen*. They thought my children were possessed.”²⁷ Another said, “All these things, the psychological trauma, you feel like the community knows what happened to you. And those who come with children make it evident what happened.”²⁸

Some groups of respondents appeared to use the notions of affliction by *cen* and psychological trauma interchangeably, and in some cases individuals noted that *cen* could drive you mad. A number of groups and leaders alluded to antisocial behaviour by FAPs, variously attributed to *cen*, to a ‘bush mentality’ or to reaction to stigmatisation. Manifestations included drunkenness, stealing, making threats, and aggressive outbursts; others isolated themselves.

Men and women have different susceptibilities to *cen*. Girls and women saw themselves as more sensitive and gentle and hence more vulnerable to attack. Boys and men were vulnerable because they were more likely to have served as combatants, and hence to have killed more people (though, in terms of *cen*, killing in battle was considered less dangerous than killing captives, as the victim’s spirit was less likely to be able to identify his/her killer). One put it this way: “Those who didn’t participate in the fighting are the ones who suffer the most. They are ordered to club people to death and when they are moving they are sometimes instructed to walk over dead bodies, but combatants just fight and even the people they shot during the fight would not know that it was them that were responsible.”²⁹ It became clear that regardless of gender, many individuals had been forced to kill civilian captives (i.e. those abducted but not initiated into the LRA), and that killing in these circumstances, or even witnessing such a killing, led to a very high risk of *cen*.

Given this spiritual understanding of the problem by some, the available treatments are a range of cleansing and exorcism ceremonies, performed, depending on the affliction, by *rwodi* (chiefs), elders, or witch doctors.³⁰ A substantial number of groups reported the need for and benefit of such traditional ceremonies. One respondent said, “There is a high chance that combatants can turn mad unless traditional rituals are performed on them like *moyo kum*, where you have to hire a witch doctor and get a goat.”³¹

The term ‘counselling’ is used almost exclusively in northern Uganda to refer to supportive advice-giving rather than a structured talking therapy in the Western sense. ‘Sharing’ on the other hand would seem to be used to refer to supportive listening, exchanging with others who have had similar

²⁷ Female focus group member

²⁸ Female focus group member

²⁹ Female focus group member

³⁰ These rituals have been documented in two reports: Erin Baines *Roco Wat I Acholi* (2005) Liu Institute for Global Issues, Gulu District NGO Forum and Ker Kwaro Acholi; and [8] Harlacher *et al* (2006)

³¹ Female focus group member

experiences, or ‘confession’ to a trusted elder, clergyman or relative. Many reported the need for opportunities to share, for example, “It’s important to share your experiences because when you do it, you will at least be able to access some help for the problems you will have undergone. When you get to a trusted friend and speak to him, you are no longer haunted by the things that you have done.”³²

However a significant proportion felt that sharing did more harm than good. Such caution may be a reflection of warnings issued at reception centres, for more than a few respondents attributed their reluctance to share to advice given by counsellors:³³

I haven’t shared bush experiences with the [whole] group. We were cautioned at GUSCO to be very careful about sharing our experiences with either FAPs or non-FAPs because in the process you might find they are a person you hurt directly or indirectly through their relatives. So the person might seek revenge and your life would be in danger. Sharing for me would have helped, because by sharing with friends they might have helped me cope. There are those who I trust within the group and I have shared with them.³⁴

Some group leaders also warned their members about being too open about their experiences in captivity. As noted in the JRP report *Cooling of the Hearts*³⁵, a few revenge killings have taken place following confessions by former-LRA, therefore advice to be wary of whom one shares with is sound in principle.

Overall men tended to be positive about the benefits of sharing, while about half of the women respondents had reservations or were strongly negative. For example, one teenage girl said, “Sharing doesn’t give you the opportunity to heal and forget because each time you’re reminded.”³⁶ Therefore, reconciliation at different levels is needed for FAPs; with themselves and their consciences, reconciliation with the spirit world, ancestors and their culture, and reconciliation with their families and communities. For some this involves forgetting the past, for others the opportunity to talk about their experiences. It was reported that there was a need for economic assistance to perform traditional ceremonies which could address the different levels of reconciliation required. However it was also reported that for some individuals additional psychological assistance was needed given the severity of their symptoms, and that for some, their born-again Christianity was a barrier to engaging in traditional rituals.

A wide range of economic disadvantages were reported by our respondents, some resulting from social exclusion through stigmatisation. There was also a notable level of physical injury, mainly resulting from beatings or being forced to carry heavy loads, though also due to combat and landmine injuries. These injuries prevented individuals from undertaking much or any physical labour. One said, “While in captivity we were beaten, there was so much suffering. Now I’m weak, I’m not capable of hard labour. I can’t dig so I have no way of earning money. I rely on the World Food Programme.”³⁷ Even those physically able were often unable to access land. Where these difficulties were absent, individuals in some areas were afraid to leave the camp for fear of re-

³² Male focus group member

³³ [4] Akello *et al* (2006)

³⁴ Male focus group member

³⁵ Justice and Reconciliation Project *Cooling of the Hearts: Community Truth Telling* 2007 p 10

³⁶ Female focus group member

³⁷ Male focus group member

abduction. This applied mainly in the areas of Kitgum and Pader Districts where LRA ‘sleeper’ groups are known still to operate. As one said of FAPs, “They fear to move to their gardens, because if they come across the LRA remnants, then they would be killed instantly.”³⁸

Lack of education was reported as both cause and consequence of poverty. FAPs are more likely than other children in IDP camps to lack education both through time spent in the bush and through lack of parental support. A common theme was expressed by one: “On my abduction they gathered all my family members and burnt them in our hut, so when I returned everyone was dead. There was no one to help me. I’m in P7 but I have no one to help with my school fees.”³⁹

The perception of almost all of our respondents from peer groups was that while there was external assistance available to FAPs it was not reaching them (or anyone they knew directly). A number of groups had established themselves with the primary aim of accessing such assistance, though only one group had succeeded to any degree. Of all those we spoke to, only one individual, who had a serious landmine injury, had received substantial assistance. Lack of assistance was variously attributed to corrupt selection of recipients of assistance, overemphasis on Gulu District at the expense of the other Acholi Districts (Kitgum, Pader and Amuru), and a variety of abuses by NGOs.

Meeting needs: peer support

The activities undertaken by groups included income-generating activities such as revolving loan schemes, collective slashing, small-scale quarry work, bricklaying, digging, and individual businesses with shared profits (butcher, *boda boda* driver, fishmonger); cultural activities such as dance, drama, and singing; sensitisation activities such as community dialogues; sports activities such as netball and football; advocating for sponsorship; and counselling. We asked respondents what a typical month’s involvement with the group looked like, and it emerged that contact varied greatly. A few groups met once every month, and in one case a group met just once in four months. This limited involvement was due to groups losing members to decongestion of camps. However a great majority of groups met at least once a week, and some met every day. Those groups involved in cultural activities seemed to come together most often, but groups would also meet several times a week for income generation activities, and sports activities. One description of a typical month’s activities was as follows: “...we hold one meeting to evaluate the month’s activities. We also play football twice a week with other local teams, like Manchester United supporters vs. FAPs, and FAPs vs. Arsenal supporters. And we dance and sing once or twice a month.”⁴⁰

Informal counselling often took place during and after these activities, but some groups also set aside a time to meet for more formal counselling sessions. Some individuals expressed that the group supplied their most significant social relationships, and a few gave the impression that they interacted almost exclusively with group members outside of group activities. However this was not necessarily the norm, as there were many respondents whose interaction with the group was limited to organised activities.

³⁸ Female focus group member

³⁹ Female focus group member

⁴⁰ Male focus group member

The 21 groups we spoke to ranged in size from 8 to 232 members, with an approximate average of 50. The ages of their members ranged from 8 to around 40 years old, although most groups had a youth focus with members in their teens and early twenties. 11 of the groups had an exclusive FAP membership, while the other 10 were also open to either vulnerable members of their communities, such as orphans and young mothers, or all community members.

Respondents expressed various reasons for joining the peer support group, including the isolation, stigmatisation and economic destitution of FAPs, and FAPs' need for cultural reconnection. One leader said, "It was started in 2005 by members for farming activities. It was my initiative to start the group due to difficulties I was seeing being faced by returnees. We wanted to come together to support ourselves; it was our original initiative not based on any group."⁴¹ The remaining groups explained that they formed at the suggestion of political or traditional leaders, who explained to them that the formation of these groups would facilitate sponsorship or other assistance.

Except for one self-appointed director, all of the group leaders were democratically elected.⁴² Individuals who held rank in the LRA were sometimes elected into positions of leadership within groups, but this was not a pattern: only 6 of the 18 leaders we interviewed had any level of rank in the bush, and only one of those was a senior commander. For the most part those who had rank were simply group members: "We have commanders in our group. They're not in leadership positions. When you return you must live as any other person, as a civilian. You leave your rank. We ignore rank because we're trying to reintegrate into the community, not the army."⁴³ However, we encountered two leaders who cited more questionable skills to manage their membership. One said, "I use the brainwashing tactics and lies that I used to keep people together in the bush to keep this group together."⁴⁴ The other leader even reported caning his members for drunkenness or theft. These two leaders did not express any sympathy for the LRA, but seemed rather to be overwhelmed by the needs and demands of their role and to have resorted to the authoritarian and manipulative methods they were familiar with.

Most peer support group leaders expressed the need for leadership training. It was clearly a heavy responsibility leading a group of highly vulnerable and often disturbed individuals, especially where such groups are highly visible, where leaders act as ambassadors for FAPs with the community, and where the behaviour of individual members can impact on how all are stereotyped. All the leaders we spoke to are attempting this without previous training or experience (unless gained in the LRA), and without support. Apart from the above exceptions, leadership skills learned in the bush seemed to be positively applied within groups.

All the peer support groups we spoke to had been set up with the aim of responding to the problems identified above as common to their members – poverty, stigmatisation, isolation and spiritual/psychological distress – mainly through income generation projects and counselling. Group income generation ranged in form from rotational loan schemes to collective agricultural activities. Counselling was variously delivered within groups by leaders and other members, or brought in from outside and delivered by elders and clergy. The practice was mostly informal and was largely

⁴¹ Female group leader

⁴² Although previous reports have noted a tendency towards the replication of LRA hierarchies within LRA peer groups our findings did not support such assertions. [3] Allen and Schomerus (2006) p.66

⁴³ Male group leader

⁴⁴ Male group leader

carried out by individuals with no training. Counselling addressed experiences of captivity and return, psychological trauma, stigmatisation, problematic behaviour and community conflict.

Cultural activities were also a popular focus. While many groups used dance, drama and song to ‘distract’ their members and keep their minds off negative experiences, some took part in order to reconnect with Acholi culture, and some used their performances for income generation. However the most common motivation behind cultural activities was to relate to and communicate with the wider community. Dance, drama and song were seen as effective methods of sensitisation, through which groups related experiences and stories of captivity and other community issues, for example imparting lessons about HIV/AIDS. One male group leader said, “Songs and sensitisation activities are a big aim of the group, because through that we are able to reach out to the community... At first when I returned I found it difficult; people stigmatised and name-called. I write songs to sensitise the community to these things... [And] we have a drama about the peace talks right now to inform the community exactly what’s going on in Juba.”

Many groups had a range of objectives, described by one as follows:

We decided to get a leader for all the FAPs because some were not mentally sound, and we wanted to have someone to check their behaviours. We wanted to have a counselling base. We found that some people used to stigmatise FAPs... So we founded this as a place to talk, and to tell them not to return evil with evil... We deter bad behaviour and encourage members to have a good heart. We encourage them to stick together as members because NGOs might come. We also encourage members to take agriculture very seriously now that they’re home. And we tell them not to stick to the past, to move forward.⁴⁵

Such a wide focus has sometimes been characterised as problematic in that “many youth groups are attempting to address each problem through individual and disconnected interventions or replicating those already in practice by other agencies, rather than engaging in a strategic analysis of what actors are already involved in and where there are gaps that need to be filled.”⁴⁶ However the same report by the Women’s Commission notes that a holistic response does seem appropriate given the interconnectedness of the needs and challenges of young people. Our perception of the groups we spoke to was that they were responding to the unmet needs that confronted them in an integrated way rather than trying to replicate other agencies’ interventions.

Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats

Almost all groups reported improved relations with the community at large as a result of their activities, manifested by areas of cooperation, and reduced name-calling and stigmatisation. This was variously attributed to better mutual understanding, respect from community members for groups’ achievements, improved behaviour on the part of FAPs, engagement with elders and camp leaders and more general contact between abducted and non-abducted people. One leader said, “The sharing of advice and ideas amongst the group members and the community has shaped the behaviour of the FAPs and has also managed to control emotional behaviour of the FAPs who were

⁴⁵ Male group leader

⁴⁶ [21] Women’s Commission (2007)

stigmatised by some community members. The community has become supportive to the group.”⁴⁷
Another said,

Due to dialogue with the community, they do not point fingers at returnees any more. Elders are also involved in dialogue with the group and they play a role by advising members. There are changes in the lifestyles of the FAPs, like from isolation to socialisation with others in the community. Members of the group know how to stay and approach issues in the community, for example talking to one another in a good voice. The group now counsels people, both the FAPs and non-FAPs, especially those with problems.⁴⁸

Cultural activities such as dance and drama are particularly effective vehicles for bonding between group members and the community, as well as having therapeutic impact on participants. Many respondents reported appreciation of reconnecting with their culture. Others, that these activities provide respite from anxiety and memories of the bush. This response was typical of many: “It gives us a moment of happiness because those who used to ill-treat us praise us when they watch our dramas and that makes us happy. Also it gives us the ability to forget the atrocities we committed in captivity. Some admit they’ve been getting better because the community is treating them well. It has helped most in the area of stigma and name-calling.”⁴⁹

Reports of better community relations were more muted amongst FAP-only groups, where some improvements were noted but significant problems remained. As one said, “The community knows the group and some are against the group and refer to the group members as those possessed by cen. But other community members appreciate the unity they see in the group.”⁵⁰

NGOs sponsoring peer groups in northern Uganda overwhelmingly support the formation of mixed groups, in the sense of FAP and non-FAP membership. According to Caritas and Concerned Parents Association (CPA), FAP-only groups can generate suspicion and resentment in the community. Our respondents were divided on the issue of group composition. Many echoed the concern of NGOs: “Now that we’re home I don’t think FAPs should stay in isolation. If we did we would be encouraging stigmatisation. Since we became mixed I’ve seen stigma reduce.”⁵¹ However, others preferred the idea of FAP-only groups where members hold a greater degree of trust based on shared experiences. For example, “Assume that this gathering was mixed, the non-FAPs would contribute, but then they would go back to the community and tell them that all we were discussing were FAP issues.”⁵² “As FAPs we have suffered so it’s very okay if the group remains only FAPs. FAPs have gone through a lot and non-FAPs were here in the care of their parents so they don’t understand. That would mean disagreement when we came together.”^{53 54}

⁴⁷ Male group leader

⁴⁸ Male group leader

⁴⁹ Male group leader

⁵⁰ Male group leader

⁵¹ Female focus group member

⁵² Female focus group member

⁵³ Male focus group member

⁵⁴ Preference did not necessarily reflect the composition of the respondent’s own group. Some from mixed groups longed for their group to be comprised only of FAP members, and vice versa. Most individuals’ feelings seemed to be linked to their impression of community acceptance - those who reported positive reception by their communities were more optimistic about mixed membership, whereas those suffering from stigmatisation were more likely to appreciate the protection and sanctuary offered by all-FAP groups.

A few groups explained their mixed membership as a necessity born of community pressure rather than preference: “Initially [our group] was only for FAPs, but lots of non-FAPs approached us and wanted to join. We let them join because if not it would form the basis for more stigmatisation”.⁵⁵ Although we did encounter one peer support group whose membership was originally mixed and had subsequently lost its non-FAP members, in general the trend was in the opposite direction. Over time many groups that began as all FAPs accepted and in some cases sought out non-FAP members. Becoming mixed would therefore seem to be a trade-off: maximising community acceptance at the expense of providing a sanctuary for those who are scarred by the bush.

A majority of respondents reported that the opportunity both to talk about their painful memories and receive advice from fellow group members had been extremely helpful to them. When asked with whom it was easiest to share, a vast majority preferred sharing their experiences of the bush with other FAPs, and indicated that sharing with non-FAPs was dangerous: “If you share outside the group it will turn into gossip and people from the community will begin to fear you.”⁵⁶

Patrick Bracken, writing of his experiences working with conflict survivors in the Luwero Triangle in the late 1980s, states, “Recovery from violence and trauma is happening all the time as communities rebuild their lives after war. It is in the regaining of an economy, a culture and a sense of community that individuals find a way of living in the wake of terrible suffering.”⁵⁷ If so, then peer support of the kind we have found is probably a highly important vehicle for recovery from trauma, not simply through their overt psychosocial interventions but through all their reintegration activities. Our respondents suggested that those experiencing severe psychological problems sometimes found relief within groups. However, although most groups offer counselling and psychosocial support to their members, many feel that certain issues and cases are beyond their capacity. As one leader put it, “Some FAPs are totally mad. While in captivity they were beaten and left for dead so their heads are not okay. We have one here ... who is always shivering. I cannot cure her because these people I cannot help them - they need proper help.”^{58,59}

Most of the groups included at least some economic component in their activities. Agricultural activities appeared to be amongst the most successful of these, though this took place mainly in the eastern districts of Kitgum and Pader, and possibly reflects a greater availability of land in these areas. Economic activity is obviously very significant for members of the groups in terms of survival. Economic recovery can play a critical role in recovery from trauma and in building individuals’ sense of self-worth. Some groups reported having lost members through failure to provide economic benefits, and we encountered some members of groups that had disbanded altogether through failure to provide such benefits. Some group leaders reported pressure from members to produce economic benefits and external support as one of their greatest difficulties.

It was apparent that the level of economic benefit to members varied substantially between groups: in some it was fairly minimal, while in others it was clearly the members’ principle source of

⁵⁵ Female focus group member

⁵⁶ Female focus group member

⁵⁷ Patrick Bracken, *Trauma: Culture, Meaning and Philosophy* (2002) London: Wirr p219. The Luwero Triangle is the area in central Uganda that suffered extensive civilian casualties and human rights abuses during the seven-year conflict between the NRA and the then government

⁵⁸ Male group leader

⁵⁹ The current debate on appropriate interventions for child soldiers experiencing trauma is explored in *Trauma, resilience and cultural healing: how do we move forward?* (2007) Dr Linda Dowdney, Editor, Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, Psychosocial Webpage www.child-soldiers.org/resources/psychosocial

sustenance. There are indications that in Maslovian terms,⁶⁰ groups need to make at least a nod towards the most basic levels of need if they are to engage members with respect to higher needs. People in IDP camps are so focused on the process of survival that they often cannot appreciate, or justify to themselves the time spent on, gaining the cultural, social and psychological benefits of group membership where these are unaccompanied by material benefits. Certainly those groups where there were both material and psychosocial benefits, irrespective of the extent and relative balance of these, seemed to have the most satisfied, engaged and appreciative memberships. Cooperative working is a central feature of traditional Acholi agricultural life, and it was apparent from responses that communal work resonated positively with both the group members and the communities they lived amongst. Even FAP-only groups reported winning respect from community members for their collective work activities.

Group income-generating activities have provided some alleviation of economic strain, but the majority of group members still identified their economic status as problematic. For the most part the groups expressed very modest needs in relation to maximising their economic effectiveness. Requests for equipment to allow their businesses to thrive were frequent, as well as training in small business skills, and such interventions could we believe have major impacts.

Many groups expressed a strong interest in being actively involved in future reintegration processes for those LRA still to return, and advanced the argument that they were well equipped to undertake this having been through the process themselves. They were also concerned about the number of guns in circulation and believed that their knowledge of the locations of hidden arms caches would allow them to play a significant role in any future disarmament process.

Respondents feared that following a successful Juba process, they might encounter individuals who have caused them serious harm – or to whom they have caused harm – leading to new tensions. Examples were given of how such encounters have been successfully managed. However, certain senior LRA figures were considered a serious threat in or out of the LRA. While respondents thought their groups could have an impact on individuals returning with a ‘bush mentality’, there were concerns about how large numbers of such individuals all joining a group at once would be contained. Specific concerns included commanders returning who try to reclaim their ‘bush wives’.

A few groups were concerned that the process of return, through which members would be physically separated, would make continued activities difficult. However, most were confident that ways for bringing members together would be found, if at less frequent intervals. A number of groups believed that a majority of members would be likely to remain in the camps for the foreseeable future whether through fear, physical disability or lack of access to land.

Current problems identified by groups included promises of assistance made by other agencies but not kept; exploitation of groups by NGOs claiming to be supporting them, but without making inputs; corruption on the part of camp leaders and NGO staff, diverting training and other benefits intended for them to non-FAP relatives.

⁶⁰ Maslow’s theory of a hierarchy of needs posits that there are five categories of need: physiological, safety, love/belonging, esteem and self-actualisation, and that an individual’s engagement with higher levels of need is dependent on meeting those more basic in the scale.

Conclusions and recommendations

As Kingma has pointed out, reintegration efforts in northern Uganda have “rested largely on the shoulders of former combatants and their families.”⁶¹ According to one of the principal NGO providers to peer support groups, “If reintegration and reconciliation is to be sustainable, communities must be responsible for it. They must be empowered”. Although the need for external support remains, local ownership of the reintegration process is essential. Many organisations operating in northern Uganda feel that peer support groups offer a sustainable reintegration strategy, because they are both grass-roots level and evocative of Acholi social organisation. Peer support accomplishes sustainable benefits through empowerment of group members who share psychosocial support and skill training with each other.

Group leaders identified some key factors that allowed peer groups to thrive. These were characterised in two ways: internal factors of success included strong leadership, group unity, member commitment and perseverance, transparency, accountability and monitoring. External factors included training, funding, and support from parents, community members, camp leaders, and elders. Training was the most frequently identified group need, which was requested in the following areas: leadership, group management, conflict management, counselling, communication skills, peace building, vocational skills, life skills, health issues (such as HIV/AIDS education), dealing with stigma, and utilisation of resources. Training was seen as a way to strengthen the group, empower members and become self-sufficient. Respondents identified a need for cooperation and dialogue between peer support groups, local leaders and organisations.

Recommendations

Organisations seeking to support and foster peer support should:

1. Establish codes of conduct that focus on sustainability and the long-term needs of civil society organisations, especially grass roots organisations, through sensitive and appropriate grant-making. This should:
 - a. Enable the peer support group to define the need and activity to be pursued, avoiding ‘donor driven’ agendas;
 - b. Provide resources that are appropriate to their organisational capacity to manage;
 - c. Resource for long-term sustainable development;
 - d. Encourage locally defined organisational models, of governance, of service design, and of priorities;
 - e. Respect decisions about their role and membership, for example whether they prioritise community acceptance or sanctuary;
 - f. Seek to minimise conflict between subgroups or individuals
2. Enable networking between groups so that they can learn from each others’ experience and achievements.

⁶¹ Kees Kingma ‘The Role of Demobilisation in the Peace and Development Process in Sub-Saharan Africa: Conditions for Success’ (1996). *African Security Review* Vol. 5 No. 6. p9.

3. Provide training to representatives of these groups in the areas they identified as most needed: leadership and counselling.
4. Pay attention to the issue of group selection: in the perception of those we spoke to, working through camp leaders in identifying FAP beneficiaries often leads to resources being diverted away from those in greatest need.
5. Support ongoing, in-depth evaluation of peer support as a psychosocial intervention for vulnerable individuals in the northern Ugandan and other post conflict contexts.
6. Consult peer groups in planning the process of return of ex-combatants from Garamba, drawing on their own skills to promote successful reintegration. In addition, ensure that the concerns, interests and needs of existing FAPs are recognised in planning for the DDR of the remaining LRA forces in Garamba.
7. Reception centres should transform themselves into resource centres where FAPs can receive psychological and physical treatment, training and advocacy, while at the same time establishing extensive referral networks, both with local authorities and service providers, but also with peer groups of FAPs and FAP parents and families.
8. Programmes supporting war-affected youth, whether in direct income generation, skills training or formal education should be expanded to reflect the numbers of individuals involved. Estimates of numbers abducted over the course of the war are in the many tens of thousands, and numbers who have passed through reception centres exceed 20,000. If programmes are to be targeted at the population in general with a proportion of places reserved for FAPs, then the scale of such programmes needs to be related to the numbers of FAPs if they hope to be comprehensive.
9. Assistance should be provided to tackle the severe trauma suffered by the very large numbers of children and youth in northern Uganda: evidence suggests that this should include a range of interventions including both traditional practices and culturally adapted Western mental health treatments.